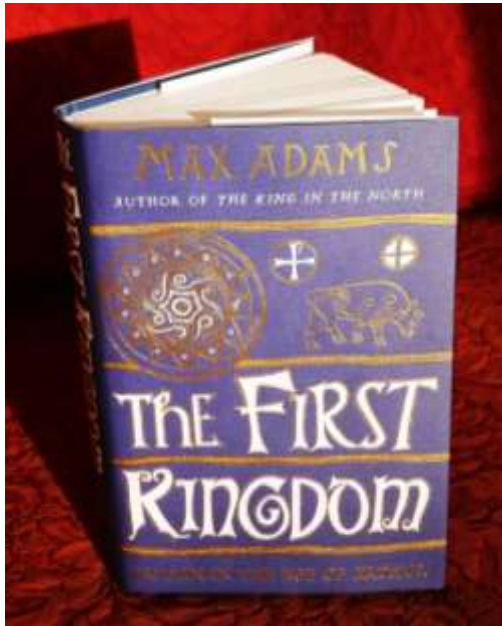


First Kingdom Hardback



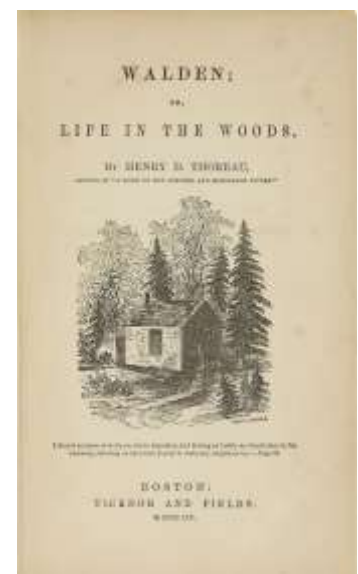
I have my first advance copies of the new hardback – sumptuously produced and very handsome. It weighs 830 grams. I don't know why or when I developed the bait of weighing books – perhaps its something to do with the birth announcements one used to see in posh papers. 830 grams is chunky, for sure.

The Times are running a 'news' story on it this week (19th January). I'm always uncomfortable about such things – they want a headline, and the headline, so far as I'm concerned is 120,000 words long. But there's a little frisson in the press at the moment, about the release of a new film dramatising the discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship

burial by Basil Brown and Edith Pretty on the eve of the Second World War – and since most of my 'Dark Age' books allude to it in one way or another, it seems a bit of a no-brainer to try and make something of the connection. It is, in any case, part of the contractual obligation of the author to publicise their book and co-operate with marketing. And why wouldn't you? Well, for once I have had to turn something down. There is an offer of an extensive piece in *The Daily Express*. All publicity is good, they say; but, firstly, I detest *The Express* as a paper; and, secondly, I fear that such outlets would only want something nationalistic – when the whole point of the book is to get away from that. Maybe I'm being too snooty; but one has to draw the line somewhere.

Me and Henry David Thoreau

Aside from the fact that we both wrote books about woods and the experience of living in them (and his *Walden* of 1854 has become a classic), he and I have one other thing in common: we both published books on our own behalf at one time or another. I was struck this week by a quote of his that appeared somewhere or other. Before *Walden* made him famous and successful, he wrote to a friend, "I now have a library of nearly 900 volumes, over 700 of which I wrote myself." I know how he felt – I am the main stockist for *The Ambulist*, my favourite of my own books and the only one I ever pick up and read with genuine pleasure (partly because I forget how it ends..). So I still have a few boxes padding out my storage space and quite a few on the shelves.



The Wood Age

I have drafted a fifth chapter of the narrative for *The Wood Age*. In normal times I would think myself way ahead of the game, because it's not due for submission until the end of September; but these are not normal times. The book was commissioned with a view to including quite a bit of travel which has, of necessity, been cancelled or postponed so far. I can delay some of it in the hope that the world frees up a little later in the year; but that means that the flavour of the place and the detail of observation will need to be retrofitted into the basic narrative structure. That's always risky: I worry that sharp-eyed or –eared readers will be able to spot the join.

I'm hoping to make visits to Canada, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Latvia and Egypt – and that's leaving aside some even less probable destinations like Samarkand (where they have an old fashioned paper mill) and Dakar in Senegal, where I'd like to talk to boat builders and kora makers. Who knows if it will be possible? One way of circumventing the problem is to create a series of between-chapter vignettes – short essays on buildings or museums that I have managed to squeeze in during the year: no pretence at integration; they would stand alone. That'll be a matter of discussion with my editor.

It also affects ongoing negotiations with an American publishing partner who seems to be keen on a US edition. That's great news – it reduces costs and increases audience potential. But compromises will be inevitable. That negotiation has another impact – they need to see a couple or three chapters and a quite detailed series of chapter outlines; so writing is interrupted for the time being while I clean up earlier material.

Reading

I have two books on the go at the moment. One is Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds* (a Joycean comic riff); the other, George Sturt's lovely 1923 memoir *The Wheelwright's Shop*, an account of the business of making wheels and the characters who made them, when the traditional trade was dying out with the advent of the motor car. His prose is stylish, sometimes poetic; the detail rich and textured. It is effortlessly pleasurable to read.

... the coming of the sawyers, towards winter time, when a roof over their heads became desirable, woke up the master wheelwright to a new interest in the timber he had bought. The proof was beginning, personal to himself. His judgement in buying those trees was put to its first test now. Its last was far ahead. Not until the seasoned timber was proven on the workman's bench in five or six year's time would the final verdict be given; but the first test began on the saw-pit, when the sawyers opened the yet green or sap filled tree. What did it look like? The wheelwright was most eager to know how it looked, that heart of ash or oak or elm, of so many decades standing, which no eye had ever seen before. Lovely was the first glimpse of white ash-grain, the close-knit oak, the pale brown and butter-coloured elm.